

Message to the Congress Transmitting the Report of the National Endowment for the Arts April 6, 2000

To the Congress of the United States:

In accordance with the provisions of the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act of 1965, as amended (20 U.S.C. 959(d)),

I transmit herewith the annual report of the National Endowment for the Arts for 1998.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,
April 6, 2000.

Interview With Dan Rather of the “CBS Evening News” April 6, 2000

Mr. Rather. First of all, thanks for doing this.
The President. Glad to.

Elian Gonzalez

Mr. Rather. I want to talk to you about guns, gun legislation. But the day’s news is on Elian Gonzalez. His father is here; the boy’s father is here. How soon can he expect to see the child?

The President. Well, first, I think we should say it’s a good thing that he’s here. I’m glad he’s here. And the Justice Department is working on that, and I think in a way we’re fortunate to have an Attorney General who understands this issue, because Janet Reno was the prosecutor in Dade County for many years. And they’re working on it. I don’t know, I can’t answer with any specifics. But I have confidence that they’ll do the best they can to handle it in an expeditious and sensitive way.

Mr. Rather. “In an expeditious and sensitive way.” Mr. President, from almost all other citizens, if the Immigration Service rules, and a Federal judge backs the ruling, then people will obey the law. What’s happened here?

The President. Well, I think the people—you can ask them; they can speak for themselves better than I do. But they, I think they feel that they’re not sure that the process was adequate since it occurred in Cuba. I think that’s basically what’s going on.

And you know, some of the people there are just against anybody going back to Cuba. But I think there are a lot of people who have genuine questions about it. And I think the fact

that the father has come here and will be in a position to show his concern for and desire to be reunited with his son should be a big help. And as I said, I think the Justice Department will do a good job here, and I think Attorney General Reno really understands what’s going on. And I think we’ll work through it.

Mr. Rather. You have consistently said that the father speaks for the son. You stand by that?

The President. Well, that’s the decision that was made by the INS. They went down and interviewed the father extensively. And they concluded that based on his previous contacts, which were regular, with his son, that he was a fit representative to speak for his son. And under our law, since Elian Gonzalez is a very young child, someone must be the designated person to speak for him. And under our law, the parent, as long as he is a fit parent, is that person.

So the INS made the decision that they felt was appropriate, and the judge ruled that they had the authority to make it. And now the family members in Miami are appealing to the Court of Appeals and arguing that there ought to be a more extensive inquiry into his best interests. That’s the legal position.

But I think that the main thing is that the Justice Department is handling it and that in the end the law ought to prevail. And I don’t think that the young man’s best interests are served by the rest of us talking about it too much. I think the Justice Department is going

to try to work through this, and I have confidence that Janet Reno will handle it in a good way.

Mayor Alexander Penelas of Metro-Dade County, Florida

Mr. Rather. I respect what you say about perhaps we shouldn't discuss it too much. But the mayor of Miami—I have in mind you saying, well, the law takes care of this. But the mayor of Miami has said that if anything bad happens, he will hold you and Janet Reno directly responsible, and—I think I quote him, at least indirectly, correctly—don't expect any help from him or the city of Miami in enforcing the law. Did that surprise you?

The President. It did. But I think there's been some indication since then that he and others want to get this back in a lawful process. And I think the mayor of Miami is a fine young leader with an enormous amount of potential. But he represents the Cuban-American community. He's part of it. They have—I think that it's fair to say they have a big presumption against anything that happens in Cuba, including an INS proceeding.

But I think that in the end, the rule of law will prevail in this country. The overwhelming majority of Cuban-Americans are law-abiding good citizens. They've made a great contribution to our country. And I think in the end, the rule of law will prevail. And I think we ought to have—just take a deep breath here and realize this is a highly unusual case, and let the Attorney General work through it. I believe that they will. I believe she'll do a good job on this.

Vice President Al Gore

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, you've consistently said that we should not politicize the case of this 6-year-old boy. But your Vice President has broken with your administration's position, a clearly political move. One, were you surprised by that? And two, are you irritated or angry about it?

The President. Well, first of all, I don't know that it was clearly political, in the sense that there was a bill introduced in the Congress to deal with what the people in Miami say is the main defect in the INS proceeding. They say—you know, it's interesting. If you notice, they haven't attacked the father. They haven't claimed that he was an unfit father.

Their claim is entirely different. Their claim is that even if he is a fit father, that it's not in Elian Gonzalez's best interests to be returned, at least at this moment. That's their position. So they say, if the INS followed the law, then the law ought to be changed so that a determination of his best interests can be made.

Now, once the bill was introduced—there are a lot of reasons I don't agree with the bill. I don't support the bill. But once the bill was introduced, I think every public figure in America, national figure, was going to have to take a position on it.

And as a matter of fact, I don't believe it was a purely political position. I know the conventional wisdom is that the Vice President's position was purely political, but he talked to me—I don't know, a day or two after Elian Gonzalez's case became public, weeks and weeks and weeks ago, and said, "You know, I'm very worried about this process. I'm afraid we're going to have a lot of problems with this process. I'm just not sure it's adequate."

So you know, he personally and privately said that to me long before this bill was introduced and long before it became a matter of big public debate. So that's the way he personally feels. And because of that and, I think, because he is himself a candidate now, I think he had to take a position and say what he thought.

Mr. Rather. Respectfully, Mr. President, a member of the Vice President's staff has been quoted as saying that it "was a political decision." And too, he went on to say, the Vice President isn't going to "fall on his sword" for you. That would lead a reasonable person to believe that it was a political decision.

The President. Well, I don't know. You know, if I knew who said that and they were quoted by name, I would have more regard for the quote.

I don't think he should fall on his sword for me. He's out there now making his own case to the American people. All I can tell you is, I'll bet you that staff member didn't know that I talked to Al Gore shortly after this case became public, and he said to me privately that he was disturbed about the process and whether it could adequately account for this young man's best interests. That's what he told me a long time ago, purely privately, and long before he ever said anything publicly about it.

Mr. Rather. I want to move on to the subject of guns, but before we—just as we leave this—

The President. He might have meant, you know, that falling on your sword sometimes means that you have to agree with the President, whether you really agree with the President or not. That's what Vice Presidents do when they're not independent candidates. And since I don't think he agrees with me, and since he is a candidate, I don't think he should mask an honest disagreement. And it's one that I believe that he actually believes, based on a private conversation I had long before he ever made a public statement.

Mr. Rather. So you don't have any problem with it?

The President. No.

Gun Safety Legislation

Mr. Rather. Let's talk about guns. Next week, is it fair to say you're dedicating the week to doing what you can to get increased, at least, handgun control?

The President. Yes.

Mr. Rather. You're going to Maryland to be seen with the Governor as he signs a new handgun control law into law. Then you're going to Colorado, where there is a State ballot initiative that you're backing, and this initiative contains many of the provisions that you seek in Federal law. Question, why no focus on getting new State laws passed, rather than press forward with Federal legislation?

The President. Because it'll take forever and a day. And because if you have Federal laws, they can be more efficiently administered. I mean, if you look at—and let me back up and say, I consider these measures gun safety measures. I think gun control is still sort of an explosive term to the American people, because they think we're going to take somebody's guns away from them.

And the truth is, all we've tried to do is to take preventive measures to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and children. And I think that on the specific measures, I think the overwhelming majority of the American people support us. And Colorado, which is a predominately Republican State, I believe this initiative will pass because they've had experience with it.

And I think that it's unconscionable for Congress to hide behind the fact that there are States taking action. Maryland required child

trigger locks this week, for example, and required safety training courses and things of that kind for handgun purchases. The State of Massachusetts applied its consumer protection laws to handguns, and Colorado has got this initiative to close the gun show loophole, which I think is very important. But it will take forever and a day for all the States to do that, and the Federal Government ought to do it. It's a Federal responsibility and a national problem.

You know, it's simply an extension of what we did with the Brady bill. We had all this hoopla when I signed the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban about how damaging it was to the rights of gun owners, the legitimate hunters and sports people. Not a single hunter has missed a day in the deer woods; not a single sports person has missed a sport shooting contest. Nobody has been burdened by this, and a half-million felons, fugitives, and stalkers have not gotten handguns as a result. Gun crime is at a 30-year low in America, not just because we've increased gun prosecutions, which we have, but because we have done more prevention. That's what this is about.

Mr. Rather. You're in a fierce fight on Capitol Hill to get Federal additional gun safety legislation passed.

The President. Yes.

Mr. Rather. And you set April 20th, the anniversary of the Columbine, Colorado, high school shootings as the goal. Is there any chance that it would get passed by that time?

The President. Probably not. We have a majority for it in both Houses, I think. But the Republican leadership in the Senate may be able to keep it from coming to a vote. They can't really keep things from coming to a vote in the House, so I think there is a majority for closing the gun show loophole, a majority for banning the importation of large scale ammunition clips.

Who could be against that? We've got an assault weapons ban in the country, and then we turn around and make a mockery of it by letting people import these big ammunition clips which they can put on the guns and convert them into assault weapons.

There ought to be child trigger locks on guns. Most manufacturers do it anyway. It ought to be a national requirement.

But I think we're making progress. I think the action in these States indicates it; the initiative in Colorado, with the support of many Republican officials in Colorado; the incredibly brave action that Smith & Wesson has taken to try to improve the way it markets and distributes guns and the way those handguns are sold. I hope they'll find some resonance among other gun manufacturers. So we're making progress. But this is a brutal fight. The interest behind it, the status quo, are very strong.

Mr. Rather. Do you suppose, if I may—I don't mean to interrupt—you say the interest behind this is very strong. As Butch Cassidy said to the Sundance Kid, "Who are these guys?"

The President. Well, the NRA and other groups even to the right of them, and a lot of people in the Congress, in the Republican Party, really agree with them. A handful of Democrats do. But it's basically a party fight.

And again I say, if they had any evidence that we had undermined hunting or undermined sport shooting or even undermined legitimate self-defense, it would be one thing. They don't. The only evidence they have is we have kept handguns out of the hands of half million felons, fugitives, and stalkers. And the last place, besides person-to-person transactions, that such people can get handguns with impunity is at these gun shows. So we ought to close the gun show loophole and do a background check. It's a no-brainer.

There are some minor details of adjustment that would have to be undertaken to do these background checks, to make it work when you do these one-day shows out in rural areas. But they can easily be taken care of, and we ought to do it.

Mr. Rather. You mentioned the Republican leadership in the House and the Senate. What I and other reporters talk to them, they say, basically, "Look, the President could get a lot of what he wants. He could get the trigger locks for children on handguns. He could get the ban on importing the extra long clips—if the President would simply compromise on the criminal background checks for gun shows." Why not make that compromise?

The President. Well, first of all, we already offered a compromise. John Conyers has offered a compromise to Representative Henry Hyde that we were hoping could prevail in the conference. You know, the bill is in conference

now. We got a good bill out of the Senate on this gun show loophole because the Vice President broke the tie. The bill is in conference, and Mr. Conyers offered a compromise.

Let me say, if you look at the gun shows, they want insta-check. And here's the problem. When you do these background checks—let's just look at the facts—when you do the background checks, you can get over 70 percent of the background checks done in the first hour. You can get 95 percent of them done—or over 90 percent in the first day. So they say, "Well, just agree to a 24-hour background check or an insta-check system." The real difficulty is, of the roughly 10 percent you can't finish in one day, the rejection rate in that 10 percent is 20 times higher than the rejection rate in the 90 percent. So what we tried to do was to work out an agreement where we let everybody who would be cleared, be cleared, but we didn't have an automatic release for the others, because they're 20 times more likely to have background problems which would not enable them to purchase these guns.

So I think it is an almost bizarre development, since we're more than willing to meet them halfway. We've offered them a good compromise—that they would hold this whole bill up to protect that 10 percent when they know that's where a huge percentage of the problem gun-buyers are, people that are likely to use those guns for criminal conduct.

So we have offered a compromise. John Conyers offered a good compromise to Representative Henry Hyde, and I hope and pray that they will take it or something like it. I'm willing to compromise, but I don't think that we ought to gut the main purposes of the background check. And again, you know, they say, "Well, we have these shows out in the country. They occur on the weekend. They're not all basically at big-city convention centers." But the gun could be deposited with the local sheriff's office for the weekend while the background check is completed, for example. You could deposit the gun and the check and return one or the other or both. It would be easy to work through this if they really wanted to.

I just think it's important—I think the child trigger locks are important because the accidental death rate in America of the children are so high, 9 times higher than the next 25 biggest countries combined. But we ought to close the loophole in the Brady law. I am willing

to compromise, but I don't want to destroy the purposes of the background check.

Mr. Rather. Our correspondent Maureen Maher has been doing some investigation of some of the loopholes in the Brady law, which turn out to be pretty extensive. If you could close one loophole in the Brady law, what would it be?

The President. Oh, the gun show loophole. That's the most important one. There are some other loopholes in the Brady law, but if you look at the numbers, it's been quite successful. For all of its problems, it's been quite successful. And when you do the insta-check, you know, we have to do instant checks whenever we can—when you do the insta-check, you actually—you lose some people, because if you can't wait 3 days, there are some records that haven't been logged in, for example, that won't be picked up on the insta-check. But when we passed the Brady bill, that's the best we could do. We had to take a bill that would say a 3-day waiting period, but insta-check whenever possible when it became possible. And so we're stuck with that for the time being.

I have a totally different view of this than the people on the other side of the issue. I think I've demonstrated in 7 years here I've never tried to take a gun away from a law-abiding citizen. I've never tried to interfere with hunting or sport shooting. But I believe that guns are like every other area of national life where there is a lot of loss of life and injury. Prevention is always the first line of defense.

Their position, basically, is: Punish people that violate the law; throw the book at them; but in this area alone, let's don't have much prevention, because we're worried about the second amendment or a slippery slope or whatever. And I just think they're wrong. I think that we can save so many more lives by sensible prevention and not interfere with legitimate gun owners.

President's Experience With Guns

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, did you ever own a gun?

The President. Oh, yes. I've owned a shotgun. I had a .22 when I was little kid. I had a couple of handguns when I was a Governor.

Mr. Rather. Did you hunt?

The President. Oh, yes. I suppose I was 12 the first time I had target practice, you know, shooting cans off fenceposts. And I normally went hunting, duck hunting, once a year when

I was Governor. On occasion, I went bird hunting. I've been duck hunting a couple of times since I've been President.

Smith & Wesson

Mr. Rather. Let me follow up on this Smith & Wesson deal. A number of people, none of whom want their name attached to it, say, "Dan, you have to look into this deal," because, one, Smith & Wesson was about to go bankrupt, and so this was a form of what they call financial blackmail. Anything to that argument?

The President. Not that I know of. I don't know that—if it's true, I don't know it.

Mr. Rather. I understand. Any agreement that you know of, the Federal Government has agreed to supply Federal law enforcement officers with Smith & Wesson weapons?

The President. No, that was not a part of the agreement. Since then, we have looked into the question of whether we—as have many local jurisdictions looked into the question—whether they can give any kind of preference or consideration to Smith & Wesson in their purchases because they've taken this action. But obviously, whatever they do will have to take account of the need to get the best possible weapons for their law enforcement officials.

But that was not a quid pro quo; that was something that came up later. And we're looking into—I wanted to look into to see what, if anything, we can do as well. But I know that a lot of cities were so appreciative of what Smith & Wesson did.

See, here is the deal. This is another thing. This is like the Brady bill gun show loophole. The main thing Smith & Wesson did in changing its marketing and distribution policies was to focus on a fact that I would think that the NRA would want us to focus on, and that is that an inordinately high percentage of guns used in crimes are sold through a very small percentage of the gun sellers. So the main thing, when you strip away everything else Smith & Wesson did, what they're really trying to do is to stop providing weapons to people who obviously are careless in enforcing the Brady bill or have a criminal clientele or otherwise just aren't taking care of their business.

I would have thought when Smith & Wesson came forward, since this had nothing to do with the Brady bill or anything else—this was about having gun dealers clean up their act and gun manufacturers putting the hammer on them to

do it, rewarding those that are good, punishing those that aren't. I would have thought that's the kind of thing the NRA would like. I was actually kind of surprised that they and the gun dealers went so totally the other way about this, because you can't get out of the fact—we now have evidence—a very small percentage of gun dealers sell a very high percentage of the guns used in serious crimes. That's what we're trying to get at.

Hillary Clinton's Senate Campaign

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, I have all kinds of things I'd like to ask you about, including China and the World Trade Organization, but the clock is running on us. Let me ask you two questions, and I'll let you get on to your next meeting.

You recently said at a meeting that the First Lady, in her bid for a Senate seat in New York, faces—I think this is your direct quote—"a right-wing venom machine that's collecting double tons of money to defeat her." Was that too strong, on reflection?

The President. Well, it depends on how you interpret the facts. Richard Viguerie is doing Mayor Giuliani's mail. Mayor Giuliani, when he was mayor of New York, basically said, "I'm not a Reagan Republican anymore. I'm a moderate Republican. I'm pro-choice. I'm for the Brady bill. I'm for the assault weapons ban. I'm for the President's crime program." We worked together. We had a good relationship.

Now he's got Richard Viguerie doing this venomous mailing, talking about what a left-wing crazy my wife is, when—while he was mayor of New York, he was in agreement with her and me on most issues.

Mr. Rather. While he was helping the mayor.

The President. No, while Rudy Giuliani was mayor. But the Viguerie mailings, which are being sent to people who have fought me the whole time I'm here—which is fine—are basically using the same old standard hard-core right-wing stuff, the kind of stuff we saw Governor Bush do to Senator McCain in South Carolina, that kind of—sort of that kind of thing.

And I think if he's going to do it and get the benefit of it, he can raise a lot of money, because a lot of us folks see beating Hillary or beating the Vice President as another way of going after us for what we've tried to do here on issues like gun safety and vetoing the big tax cuts to keep a balanced budget and

the surplus and other things we've fought for. They see that as a way of continuing the battle.

He can raise a lot of money that way, but I don't think he should be able to raise it for free. That is, I think he ought to have to be accountable for the rhetoric being used in his behalf and the money that's coming in as a result of that kind of inflammatory right-wing rhetoric.

Mr. Rather. Would you be surprised if I told you that tonight's CBS poll indicates the First Lady is up by 8 points now in the race with Giuliani?

The President. A little bit. But I think it's going to be a close race and a hard race. But she knows why she's running. She knows what she wants to do for New York. I'm really proud of her, and I just—I think these polls will change a lot between now and November. He's a very formidable opponent.

Mr. Rather. You don't think that what one newspaper has called the "wealthy hate Hillary campaign" will, in the end, sink her?

The President. No, I don't. I think the main thing that she's got to think about is not what they're saying about her but what she's going to say to the people of New York. I think a lot of that is—when you have opposition in politics, a lot of times what they're trying to do is distract you from doing your main job, which is to communicate with the people and to serve the people. And I think if she'll just focus on that, talk about her life, her work, and what she wants to do, I think she'll do fine.

Mr. Rather. Mr. President, I'm getting the cut signal. I so much appreciate you taking the time to do this. Thank you very, very much.

The President. Thanks, Dan.

Mr. Rather. Tell the First Lady hello for us.

The President. I will.

NOTE: The interview was videotaped at 2:25 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for later broadcast. The transcript was embargoed for release until 6:30 p.m. In his remarks, the President referred to Juan Miguel Gonzalez, father of Elian Gonzalez; Richard A. Viguerie, chairman, chief executive officer, and president, Conservative HQ.com; Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani of New York City; and Gov. George W. Bush of Texas. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.